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MORE LIGHT ON IBSEN'S YOUTH

So much has been written of late years about the great Norwegian dramatist that we receive with something of the shock of surprise a wholly new treatment of his character during the important years spent at the little town of Grimstad on the west shore of Norway, just before the student period in Christiania. In those years the earliest published poems and the first play, "Catilina," were written, and the period therefore has a direct bearing upon the development of Ibsen's genius. All earlier writers on Ibsen, from his biographer, Henrik Jæger, to the American tourist taking a snap shot at the poet on Carl Johannsgade, agree in describing him as a stern, self-centred man, abrupt of speech and formal of manner. Jæger even quotes a lady who had known Ibsen at Grimstad to prove that these qualities existed while he was still struggling with fortune as an apothecary's clerk.

Now one of Ibsen's two intimate friends from that time, Herr C. L. Due, for many years an official in the Norwegian Custom House, has contributed to the Christiania newspaper, *Aftenposten*, a series of articles entitled "From Henrik Ibsen's Youth," from which the new facts presented here are gathered. After describing his first meeting with Ibsen in the apothecary's shop, Herr Due relates an incident that fairly introduces us to the subject of the sketch. "Like so many young persons I engaged at that time in writing small poems. Having produced one of these of which I was proud, I took it along one evening to Ibsen's and confessed to him that I wrote verses. 'So, do you? Let me hear some!' was his reply. I then read my 'Sunset,' one of those expressions of melancholy, in which youth utters itself in natural description. After Ibsen had heard me he remarked, 'I write verses, too,' and at my request he read his last poem, 'Autumn.' The piece attracted me greatly and I exclaimed that it ought to be published. But this Ibsen thought out of the question, as no newspaper was issued in Grimstad and publication in a Christiania paper seemed to him impossible. As I was correspondent for the *Christiania Post* I proposed sending it to that paper and a few days later received a number which

contained in its first column the poem. . . . I was very impatient until evening came and I could bring the paper to Ibsen. With hearty sympathy and with a certain triumph on my friend's account I showed him his 'first in print.' At first Ibsen grew pale with emotion, but soon joy surged up in his face and I am convinced that he never afterwards felt such keen pleasure at sight of his works. Ibsen wrote a little later a poem on the death of Oehlenschläger, entitled "The Skald in Valhalla." This also was sent to the *Post* and was immediately published. We preserved as a deep secret from our comrades that Ibsen wrote poems."

After a while others were attracted to the bright, witty young man, and the back room in the apothecary's shop soon became a favorite meeting place, to which new comrades were constantly introduced. There was always fun with Ibsen in the centre, bubbling over as was his humor, not unmixed with sarcasm, and in spite of trying conditions in good spirits. There was no indication that anything troubled him. He possessed to a remarkable degree the elasticity of youth."

After telling of an elaborate practical joke played by Ibsen upon a foolish member of this informal club, Herr Due gives the following description of Ibsen as a host. "In addition to such nonsense there was occasionally a card party at Ibsen's to which the more intimate ones were invited. We drank punch from ointment jars, which, in the event of unexpected visitors, were emptied and thrust into our pockets. When midnight approached, some of us might suggest that Ibsen needed rest, as we knew that he used a portion of the night for his studies. But he always reassured us by saying that there was still plenty of time for both study and sleep. Perhaps Ibsen had these meetings in mind when he wrote some years later to Georg Brandes of 'the costly luxury of friends.' Ibsen's capacity for work and his physical endurance were phenomenal. With the exception of a few hours he worked all day and all night. The greater part of the daytime was devoted to the duties of the shop, as his employer was delicate and had many other interests. In addition to preparing for his examinations, Ibsen spent much time in writing and painting. And yet I never heard him complain of

weariness. He must have had an unusually hardy constitution. From motives of economy he accustomed himself to going without underclothing and an overcoat and yet he never caught cold."

The account of the young Ibsen's first and apparently only ball is in such marked contrast to Jæger's characterization that an extract may well be given. "I had several times invited Ibsen to join in these balls, but weighty reasons prevented. He had no evening clothes and he had never danced. The clothes problem was solved by one of the youths 'with full purse and empty head,' as Ibsen called them, who lent him the necessary funds. After much hesitation on his part he was introduced to a bright young lady who gladly consented to direct him, and the couple started, at first with some difficulty, but without conspicuous mishaps. Soon the galop went smoothly and was succeeded by other dances. And this was the young man of whom Jæger wrote: "Imagine him, for example, taking part in a ball. While the other young men give themselves up to boisterous mirth, he stands apart and reflects upon all the sorrow concealed beneath this smiling exterior and upon the number of dancers who seek in the waltz forgetfulness of their sufferings." The fact that these reflections are a paraphrase of one of Ibsen's own poems simply shows the danger of identifying too literally a poet's art with his life.

But to return to Herr Due. "When I touch upon the rhythm of the dance, which Ibsen soon acquired, the thought is directed to the rhythm of his verse. In his very first efforts he showed the most exemplary verse form. And yet Ibsen was not musical. When we sang together he joined in, but not in tune, as he seemed to have no ear for melody. That seemed to be his only deficiency. . . . Everything else that he attempted yielded to his eminent capacity."

In 1850 Ibsen left Grimstad for Christiania and his early friend's account after this period is confined to a few references that bring out the sharp contrast between the poet's earlier and his later nature. The first occasion on which this was noticed was in 1863 when the two friends met at Bergen. "We were seated together with some acquaintances, when one of these asked Ibsen about a certain passage in 'The Comedy of Love,'

which had recently appeared. His only answer was, 'Read the book again,' and new questions were met with the laconic reply, 'Read the book once more.''' On a later occasion, Herr Due, while visiting Ibsen in Christiania, remarked that the poet gave himself good time, as there was almost always a period of two years between the dramas. "And yet I work hard every day," was the reply. "I spend at least five hours a day on my plays."

In conclusion this little anecdote, illustrating the curious tendency to formalism in the man who in his youth drank punch from ointment jars and bade defiance to the conventions of Grimstad: "One day when Ibsen was walking down the street with his usual deliberate steps, I happened to join him on his left side. After a pleasant return of my greeting, a restlessness possessed him, the cause of which was not apparent to me. He constantly moved about as if to get on my left side. 'No!' I said, 'it is not proper that I walk on the right side of a grand cross of St. Olaf' (a high Norwegian order conferred upon Ibsen). 'Yes,' answered Ibsen, thou art the older!'"

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